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ARTICLE

CRITICAL THEORY AS A CRITIQUE OF UNSUSTAINABILITY: 'DAMAGED LIFE' IN THE ANTHROPOCENE

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Abstract: The article seeks to situate the notion of sustainability within the framework of critical theory. It shows that sustainability has normative significance for contemporary society and that contrary to many conceptions and practices of sustainability, it has latent and critical potential. The notion of critical sustainability is proposed as a post-corporate cultural model and as an alternative to the neo-liberal conception of sustainability as well as to definitions that see it only in terms of technical rationality. Critical sustainability is a challenge to what Adorno called 'deluded thinking' and as an

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alternative to the 'damaged life' that has come with the unsustainable societies of modernity. It is now increasingly apparent that one of the many contradictions of modernity is the contradiction between the belief in the infinity of growth and the finite resources of the earth to sustain it. An immanent critique of modernity from the perspective of critical theory seeks thus to disclose the antagonism and contradiction of a society predicated on infinite growth, prosperity and progress but with finite resources.

Keywords: Critical theory, sustainability, critical sustainability, environmentalism, nature, political ecology

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Wrong life cannot be lived rightly
T.W. Adorno, Minima Moralia:
Reflections from Damaged Life (2005 [1951])

In this paper I offer a perspective on sustainability from the standpoint of critical theory. The notion of sustainability and the related notion of sustainable development is one of the most discussed topics not only in social science, but in the wider society. It is now a core ingredient of the institutional order and of contemporary politics. Yet, it is not in itself a notion that has a clear relation to critique or normative content. There are good reasons to be critical if not dismissive of it. Deriving from global policy and corporate discourse, it is replete with contradictions and ambivalence. There is the fundamental problem that the notion of sustainability seeks to sustain that which has now become unsustainable and is therefore incompatible with radical political ecology and a concept of nature in keeping with the age of the Anthropocene. If sustainability can be redeemed as a critical concept, it is possible that it can be rendered compatible with radical political ecology. However, this is a more complicated problem, which I will not deal with in this paper, since it concerns a fundamental shift in the theory of nature from an anthropocentric to an ecocentric view of the world.

My position is that contrary to the tendency in critical thought and radical political ecology to reject sustainability as an ideology of late capitalism, it should be retained.[1] Only when its opposite, unsustain-

[1] For useful surveys of the older literature see Meadowcroft (2000) and of more recent work, see Blühdorn and Welsh (2007).

ability, comes into the picture does the notion of sustainability take on a wider significance in responding to calls for alternatives to growth and the widely felt need for collective responsibility. There is now increasingly the spectre of climate change and ungovernability in the Anthropocene as the context for sustainability to be situated as critical sustainability. In these terms, the notion of sustainability, I argue, can be reconstructed as a critical concept.

I am mostly referring to 'sustainability' as opposed to 'sustainable development', but as both are often used interchangeably, I will not insist on a hard and fast definition of either. However, the distinction cannot be entirely erased, since it relates to the difference between 'what needs to be done' and 'how it should be done': there is general consensus on the need for sustainable environmental policies, but no agreement on the means to achieve them. Since most political disputes arise around controversies on the means rather than ends, the problem cannot be ignored. While ostensibly about the 'means', sustainability also points to something beyond instrumentality. Part of the difficulty no doubt resides in different views on what should be sustained, for instance the 'western way of life' based on consumption or planetary ecology and whether it is possible to have a genuine politics of sustainability without a new concept of nature.

The modest contribution that the paper offers is to situate the notion of sustainability within the framework of critical theory. In this way, I hope to show that sustainability can be revealed to have a continued significance for contemporary society and that contrary to mainstream conceptions and practices of sustainability, it has latent and critical potential. To this end, I propose the notion of critical sustainability as a post-corporate cultural model and as an alternative to the neo-liberal conception of sustainability as well as to definitions that see it only in terms of technical rationality in the implementation of agreed policies. It is a further question whether it satisfies the demands of radical political ecology, especially given the unhappy relation between that school of thought and the anthropocentrism of critical theory.

I believe such an approach offers a corrective to tendencies towards 'post-sustainability' (Foster 2017), namely the argument that sustainability has become devoid of relevance and has become an empty term, at least within European integration since the transformation

of the progressive idea of environmental protection in the late 1980s and early 1990s to its neoliberal accommodation by the late 1990s (see Dezalay 2007). By neoliberal in this context I mean, to follow Dezalay, the entry of large multinationals and consultancy firms into the emerging field of environmental regulation. New forms of regulation thus took shape around corporatist agreements under the weak auspices of the state or simply directly through market incentives. Indeed, the market now legitimates itself as the champion of 'corporate social responsibility'. There is some truth, then, to the political exhaustion of sustainability as a normative idea, but a critical-theoretical perspective, nonetheless, need not jettison what might be termed the normalization of sustainability, even its banalization by corporate discourse, whereby everything is a contribution to 'sustainability'. In fact, this very development reveals that the notion of sustainability has become 'a free-floating signifier' with multiple meanings as regards what is to be sustained, by what means and by whom.

Its meaning then necessarily resides outside of itself. To appreciate this discursive transformation is to see that the term has become disconnected from the dominant scientific usage of the term, as well as its connection with the technical and economistic notion of sustainable development or the ideology of 'green' capitalism. It has entered into the fabric of society and has become integral to the very nature of democracy, such that it no longer resides in a domain separate to social and political institutions and practices (McKibben 2003; Young 1992). In this regard, I argue that sustainability is an inherently cultural category and needs to be understood as such. However, for this to have really critical force, the idea of sustainability must connect with other normative principles, such as responsibility and democracy. In essence, sustainability as a concept in itself does not have sufficient force to offer a critical challenge to unsustainability. The key issue then is whether it can be connected with what I call, following the critical theory tradition, *ideas of reason*, such as democracy and responsibility. A feature of these ideas of reason is that they have not been related to nature. This is perhaps where the most far-reaching change will have to occur, namely in bringing the concept of nature into the compass of critical theory. However, sustainability on its own does not have sufficient force to become such an Idea of Reason.

It should be clarified at the outset that the notion of critical sustainability proposed here is not entirely novel. It exists as a term but with a limited usage. Greenberg, with a focus on California, invokes the notion of critical sustainability (Greenberg 2014, 2018). Critical theory applications are few. Rose and Cachelin (2018) have sought to incorporate critical theories into the theory of sustainability and also use the term. However, they do not discuss specific critical theories and do not discuss critical theory in the Frankfurt school tradition, the concern of this paper. Fuchs (2017) has discussed sustainability from a critical theory perspective in relation to capitalism, but has not addressed the wider range of issues that sustainability raises nor other positions within critical theory. Jacob (1997) has discussed sustainability from a critical theory perspective but largely with respect to development. In general, critical theory itself has not engaged with the sustainability debate. While there have been some contributions more generally to environmentalism and risk, as in important contributions of Eder (1996) and Strydom (2002), the contribution of critical theory has been limited. A classic volume published two decades ago on sustainability and the social sciences offers invaluable studies into theories of sustainability that reflect the concerns of the social science (Becker and Jahn 1999). However, the book does not discuss critical theory as such.

In view of the wider concern with the question of nature since Marx and the argument of Adorno and Horkheimer in the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* that domination begins with the domination of nature, there is clearly scope for much work on this topic (Adorno and Horkheimer 1979 [1944]). It is beyond the scope of this paper to develop a philosophy of nature and to address the contested debate about environmentalism in critical theory and the extent to which it is contrary or compatible with radical political ecology (see Brulle 2002; Eckersley 1990; Gunderson 2014, 2016; Vogel 1996). These are far-reaching questions that challenge some of the presumptions of critical theory, which are concerned with human domination. My question is what does sustainability look like when viewed through the lens of critical theory and whether it can help us to reframe the environmental dimension of sustainability.

Rather than an overly general view of critical theory or one confined to its theory of nature, this paper operates with a specific interpre-

tation of the theoretical and methodological approach of critical theory. To begin, I outline some of the defining tenets of critical theory (1). On this basis, I discuss sustainability from a critical theory perspective in order to arrive at a notion of critical sustainability (2). I then propose a framework for the analysis of sustainability and identify six main discourses (3). The article concludes with a defence of critical sustainabilities (4).

1. GENERAL THEORETICAL AND METHODOLOGICAL FEATURES OF CRITICAL THEORY

One of the distinctive features of critical theory is the identification of discourses and practices that have transformative potential. I have discussed this in detail elsewhere (Delanty 2020; see also Strydom 2011), and for the purpose of this article, I offer a very brief summary of the salient points.

A key concept is the notion of immanent transcendence. This concept draws attention to phenomena that are immanent in social reality and which compel social actors to transcend the given society through a re-working and re-appropriation of its own self-understanding, including its understanding of its institutional order and possibly also its relation to nature. It captures the dialectic of actuality and potentiality that is at work in social reality. I will have to let a side for now the problem that if the relation with nature does not offer such transformative possibilities, transcendence may be limited or not at all possible. To deal with this problem, I will assume, if somewhat problematically, that that there are immanent possibilities for transcendence within in the current relationship to nature.

The sources of immanent transcendence are generally unrecognised latent forces below the surface that from time to time give rise to something new, often as the result of a crisis. Such latent forces are drawn out by means of the mediating influence of ideas, concepts or principles (*e.g.* freedom, justice, peace) or their embodiment in a cultural model (international law, the constitutional state, democracy). The concept draws attention to the construction and transformation of society, including the generative forces as well as the structuring conditions

of transformation, as the focus for social analysis and research.[2] It is to be noted that the notion of an imaginary is not sufficiently robust to encompass these forces, but it is an element, nonetheless, in opening up new visions of social and political possibility.

The method that follows from the philosophical framework is immanent critique, namely a form of critique that is self-reflexive in seeking to show the discrepancy between idea and reality or the incomplete realisation of an idea or its future possibilities. Immanent critique receives its impetus from transcendence in that it is addressed specifically to those ideas of reason that open social reality to future possibilities. It is about deep potentials that have evolved in history. It is not then simply about a given social order not living up to its claims. It concerns latent possibilities that are the presuppositions of social transformation.

Deriving from Hegel's revision of Kant, ideas of reason play a central role in the shaping of cultural models as their transcendental presupposition (*i.e.* that which must be presupposed). These refer to the normative ideals of modernity that represent future possibility, including notions such as freedom, equality, solidarity, peace, democracy, self-determination. ideas of reason are the conceptual and cognitive conditions representing the transcendent dimension immanent in social reality, that is, that which must be presupposed in social analysis. As such, they are an integral part of the cognitive and normative order of society and have structure forming effects. These ideas are of an abstract nature while taking a concrete form in normative applications or interpretations or in imaginary projections (*e.g.* liberal democracy is a normative model that is based on the more abstract idea of democracy, but it is only one such normative model of democracy). Such ideas can also take on an ideological or reified form when they become reduced to concrete social arrangements and lose their transcendent character.

The critical theory tradition stresses the relations of antagonism and contradiction through which new social realities are created. This is the logic of dialectics and concerns the transformative process by which ideas of reason lead to a re-interpretation of the self-understanding of a society or a radicalization of one or more ideas of reason and corresponding forms of transformative action. It signifies an ontolog-

[2] My thanks to Piet Strydom for advice on clarifying the term.

ical notion of reality as manifest in processes of transformation. Such processes are also the basis of the possibility of societal learning, in particular the learning from the experience of catastrophe. This has been an important idea from Benjamin and Adorno to Habermas (such notions of catastrophe have not yet been connected with environmental catastrophe).

Critical theory is not only critical but theoretical: it is characterised by placing a given phenomenon in a larger context, since the particular can only be understand in relation to the whole. Nothing is simply given or natural, but is meaningful only in terms of a relation to something else. A critical theory of sustainability would thus stress the interconnections of economy, society, nature. Moreover, the totality of the whole is to be conceived in terms of relationships that are underpinned by transcendental preconditions. It may be suggested that the most significant theoretical contextualization of a given phenomenon is the relationship of subjectivity, inter-subjectivity and objectivity.

In sum, the critical theory tradition draws attention to social transformation and the positive potentials inherent in social reality as the empirical focus for critical social analysis. In this way, potentiality is related to actuality.

A few brief remarks can be made on a number of related considerations. Not all versions of critical theory, are ‘critical’, for instance Axel Honneth’s (1996) recognition theory lacks a critical edge to many pressing societal problems, such as sustainability. While relations of recognition pervade many facets of society and few social phenomena do not entail problems of recognition, the challenges of a sustainable future are not primarily a problem of recognition, as outlined in Honneth’s theory of recognition, which is concerned with social relations between subjects. However, there can be no doubt that the problem of recognition is central to issues of sustainability in that without a re-thinking of the moral hierarchies that separate humans from nature, no sustainable life is possible at all. Such a perspective would require a re-framing of recognition in terms to include the relation to nature.

While my account is indebted to the social theory of Habermas, it would be a mistake to situate sustainability within the conflict of different rationalities, as in Habermas’s theory of communicative rationality, which sees modernity as a conflict between two dominant forms of ra-

tionality, instrumental versus communication rationality. Sustainability today cuts across these; it should not be reduced to technological or instrumental rationality, but resides in the interlinkages of subjectivity, inter-subjectivity and objectivity. For these reasons, purely constructivist approaches are also in my view inadequate, since everything is to be explained in terms of discursive construction and only requires interpretation. A critical account, instead, places a stronger emphasis on explanation and the discovery of links between different realms. It does not remain on the level of looking at social phenomena through the lens of how people experience social reality, nor the justifications or interpretations they give.

Since there is a tension between the idea of sustainability and the notion of the 'good society' or what a 'good life' would be, it is worth recalling Adorno's exploration of the difficulty of reconciling the fact that a good life cannot be easily known or created and yet there is the need to resist 'damaged life'. In *Minima Moralia* Adorno (2005) tried to show that the 'good life' is no longer possible and hence philosophy can only show what has been lost but also what might be hoped for. This is captured in the famous statement 'Wrong life cannot be lived rightly'. We now live in a situation in which "Dwelling, in the proper sense, is now impossible" (Adorno 2005, 38-39). There is no such a fully authentic life, a form of life that is reconciled to itself, as Heidegger believed. For Adorno, the illusions of such a view must be resisted. Rather than resignation, critique and resistance is called for. This is also intimated at the end of *Minima Moralia*: "The only philosophy which can be responsibly practised in face of despair is the attempt to contemplate all things from the standpoint of redemption" (2005, 247). So, even if we cannot easily create a sustainable society that can reconcile its contradictions, critical thought can unmask the damaged life of an unsustainable future.

While critical theory has been much identified with the critique of capitalism, this is not the primary or distinguishing rationale. It is clearly the case that the critique of capitalism must be central to social analysis, in particular anything to do with issues of sustainability, but it cannot be the defining feature, since a method is not defined by the object of research. Non or precapitalist societies can also be unsustainable, as Jared Diamond (2005) and Clive Ponting (2011) have shown. Let us not forget that one of the greatest experiments in modern times, the USSR, was noncapitalist and transpired to be unsustainable. For these

reasons, I disagree with Fuchs' reduction of critical theory of sustainability to a critique of capitalism (Fuchs 2017). This loses sight of the contested nature of different visions of the future and that discourses of sustainability contain accumulated learning and reflexivity.

How can such reservoirs of meaning be discovered and understood? This is where the notion of a cultural model can be introduced. Cultural models, as a term to designate cultural forms, are comprised of various structures, of which the most important are: normative, cognitive, symbolic, aesthetic and the epistemic. These give expression to different facets of cultural forms. Cultural models underpin societies and their discourses. One of the aims of critical theory is to investigate the cultural models that are operative in given domains, be it democracy, sustainability, human rights etc. They cannot be reduced to one dimension, *e.g.* the normative or the symbolic, as is often the case in social theory. Habermas stresses the normative; cultural sociology the symbolic; Castoriadis influenced social theory, the imaginary (Adams et al. 2017). This is where I disagree with the otherwise convincing analysis of Adloff and Neckel (2019) in that I do not think that what Castoriadis (1987, 369-373) calls the 'radical imaginary' offers a synthesis or ties together diverse elements such as the cognitive, the evaluative and affective dimensions. In any case, as I see it, the real contribution of Castoriadis is in his theory of the 'radical imaginary', and not in 'imaginations' more generally. I also question that notions of sustainability contain radical projections. Levy and Spicer (2013) make a lesser claim for the imaginary, but in their also generally very insightful analysis, it is devoid of any radicality. This, I argue, is because it is not connected with other radical ideas. In short, I think the notion of the radical imaginary should be confined to specific articulations that seek to express something that is radically new. Sustainability as an idea is not in itself a radical idea, but when combined with other radical ideas, it does have a transformative potential.

2. SUSTAINABILITY FROM A CRITICAL THEORY PERSPECTIVE

Sustainability, like many social phenomena, is a now a cultural concept. Originally a term deriving from the management of forests, it evolved into an ecological model for the preservation of the life-supporting

systems to become one of the main ideas behind the environmental movement (see Grober 2015; Caradonna 2014).[3] The notion became one of the main ways development could be conceived in a form that reconciled growth with awareness of the limits of natural resources and the need to protect the earth from the self-destructive tendencies of human societies. Today sustainability has lost its exclusive connection with development – itself a multifaceted and critical concept – and with governmental and corporate policy and has become in our times of crisis a more general prism through which society can view itself. Perhaps prism is too mild a term. Through the optic of the Anthropocene, it is perhaps more akin to a vortex of catastrophe.

The contemporary discourse about sustainability goes to the core of what can be regarded as the central theme in critical social theory concerning the possibility of society. The question of the possibility of society is now one that has to be posed in terms of some notion of sustainability, namely whether or to what extent the current understanding of society needs to be re-thought if society is to have a future. This re-casting of the idea of sustainability takes it out of the domain of environmentalism and places it at the core of societal self-understanding. An immanent analysis reveals how an idea, such as sustainability, can be reconstructed from the logic of instrumental rationality and technocratic governance. It also seeks to reconstruct the ideas of reason embedded in it and in the forms of consciousness that accompany it. Rather than starting with the idea of sustainability, a critical theory analysis would begin with the context of crisis, that is to say the objectivity of unsustainability. For this reason, as I argue below, it is probably best located within the context of the Anthropocene.

But what is sustainability? Strictly speaking, the notion of sustainability refers to the sustainability of natural resources, including biodiversity and the sustainability of species and habitats. It therefore entails an objective character in that it incorporates principles such as effectiveness, control, efficiency, etc. As such, it is a functional term designating scientific and technical rationality and does not in itself have normative significance. It is also a temporal condition to refer to the capacity of the present to have a future. Thus, whether the present

[3] On some of the key literature in the 1960s and 1970s, see Nature, available at: https://www.nature.com/articles/527443a [1 November 2019].

society is sustainable is ultimately a question of time, which cannot be indefinite since solutions must be found in the present. It also concerns generational responsibility, since the actions undertaken, or not undertaken, now have direct importance for future generations. In whatever way this question is posed, it is almost always a question of time; for example, the fact that a global increase of four degrees of global warming is likely by 2100 and will have dire consequences for many parts of the world (see Wallace-Wells 2019). Yet, it is also more than a temporal condition. It is also a spatial one, in that the future is not the same for everyone (Delanty 2020). Once these considerations are taken into account, it is difficult not to draw the conclusion that sustainability is more than what the term literally indicates, as a concept or principle of technical rationality.

A case can be made, then, that the idea of sustainability in capturing critical questions for the future of human societies has now become a cultural concept, entailing normative, cognitive, symbolic, epistemic dimensions. It is a medium through which contemporary societies view themselves across a range of dimensions, which can be characterised in terms of subjective, intersubjective, and objective relations. If sustainability once concerned the relation of society to nature, it is now a more general cultural term that cuts across many social and political questions, which are not primarily ones that can be designated environmental as such. The notion of sustainability, I suggest, is no longer primarily a scientific term – based only on rational technical principles of control, effectiveness, efficiency – but has become a wider idea within public discourse and resonates with many pressing public and private concerns. In this respect, it is similar to the idea of the Anthropocene, which has ceased to be a term specific to geology, where it first arose, or even to earth system science, but has become a wide cultural model (Delanty and Mota 2017). In itself, strictly speaking, sustainability is a principle comparable to other principles of objective culture, such as efficiency that are relevant to the natural environment. However, as I see it, sustainability has now combined with other principles that are of a more political and moral nature, such as responsibility and democracy.

Sustainability unavoidably poses normative questions about what should be sustained, by whom, for whom, by what means, and for how long. It is the sustainability of human society as a whole or part? Is the

sustainability of biodiversity and eco-systems? Or is it the sustainability of economic development without destroying its conditions of possibility? None of these questions – which are 'how' as opposed to 'what' questions– can be easily answered by recourse to objective or scientific facts alone because they raise issues that go to the heart of democracy and the possibility of society. As such, they are not primarily only issues of economics or technology. The famous Brundtland Report, which gave the iconic definition of sustainable development, spoke about 'needs' (the needs of the present and those of the future) (WCED 1987).[4] This is an inherently social phenomenon, neither an ecological nor an economic one. It requires both a philosophical and a sociological response.

For these reasons, I would resist the tendency to see sustainability only as an ideology of capitalism, even if that is what it effectively became in Europe, or a form of risk management. This happened, according to Dezalay, when a shift took pace from environmental protection by decree to sustainable development, whereby the latter was generally equated with sustainable growth (Dezalay 2007, 173). There can be no doubt that sustainability has been co-opted by capitalism.[5] But what has not? It is difficult to disagree with this argument, but nonetheless I would argue the concept has now become embroiled in far too many domains that it cannot be reduced to one. Moreover, its abstract or meta-cultural form transcends the specificity of interpretations, such that there will always be a surfeit of interpretations.

This condition of pluralization and contestation can be mistaken for 'post-sustainability', whereby sustainability in ceasing to have a specific or clear-cut meaning is redundant or exhausted of potential (Foster 2015). From a critical theory perspective, this would be to misunderstand its transformation into a cultural category or model. There is thus a real underlying acceptance of the normative good of sustainability and therefore the possibility for a powerful immanent-critique is clear. As I argued, central to critical theory is the analysis of the relations between the subjective, the intersubjective and the objective;

[4] The Report indicated: "Sustainable development is development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs" (WCED 1987, 43).

[5] For example, on sustainability as an advertised for big business, Conlon (2019).

it cuts across the personal, the social and natural dimensions. In this view, the concept of sustainability has moved from a concern with one dimension (for example, finding the right balance between growth and development or with ecology or economics) to the interconnectivity of economy, society, nature, the state and the individual citizen. This has all come about in the context of a situation in which, it has been widely recognised, nature is no longer a separate domain outside the societal, an argument made most forcibly by Latour (1993, 2017), but is also central to the new anthropology of nature (Franklin 2002) and the now well established 'death of nature' thesis (Merchant 1990; MacNachten and Urry 1998).

To view sustainability in holistic terms accords with the emphasis in critical theory, going back to Hegel and Marx, on totality: the need to locate something in a wider context and to see the interconnections between the elements and dimensions of social forms. For these reasons, I argue that sustainability is not primarily a concept of ecology or of the environment, but that it also incorporates social justice and cultural frames of meaning. It pertains to the question of the sustainability of pension systems, urban infrastructures, higher education, health care systems, affordable housing. It refers to the relationships between different realms, ecology, economy, social justice etc. The normative appeal of sustainability cuts across all these levels. In doing so, and in going beyond the level of technical rationality, a triadic relation of responsibility, critique and sustainability forms.

New discourses arising from these linkages, which are no longer confined to the borders of nation-states. Sustainability goes to the heart of cosmopolitics in posing challenges for democracy to extend political community to encompass global publics. One of the productive themes in this context is the application of deliberative democracy to sustainability (see for example, Dryzek and Pickering 2019, and O'Mahony and Skillington 1996). Dryzek and Pickering make an important contribution in developing a notion of reflexive sustainability as part of a wider concern with public deliberation. Affirming the need for an open approach to sustainability, they say it cannot be entirely open: "Openness remains vital for imagining new options and criticizing existing practices, but a degree of closure is required in order to govern and

thereby to safeguard the values at stake" (2019, 89). Their account of reflexive sustainability accords with the notion of critical sustainability.

In becoming a cultural concept, sustainability is perhaps best understood as constituting a cultural model. Taking the simple case of one – though as I shall argue there is a plurality of cultural models of sustainability – its form is characterised by a number of interacting dimensions. As mentioned, there is first the strong presence of normative ideas. In many ways, sustainability is a normative concept in that it aims to remedy a situation that is seen as unsustainable. The normative imperative can take a critical form, but it can also be a somewhat subdued attempt to maintain the *status quo* by dealing with the symptoms of a problem rather than the underlying causes.

There is also the symbolic dimension in that sustainability encroaches the domain of symbolic politics and interaction, as in the symbolic power of, for example, the 'green' economy or eco-products, such as the 'eco-drive' label in cars, or the policy of planting trees for every flight to off-set carbon emissions.[6] The power of an idea does not only reside it its normative force, but must also become embodied in the symbolic level of social interaction for it must be communicable. Once it is rendered transmissible, it then goes to further the strength of its normative claims.

The cognitive and epistemic dimensions also come into the picture in that sustainability is also a mode of knowing. Indeed, the tremendous impact of sustainability has been to a considerable degree due to scientific arguments. But more than this, it is a way in which the world is framed. Strydom makes a cogent case for the conceptualization of sustainability as cultural:

> sustainability or sustainable development is above all a cultural form consisting of words, concepts, propositions, theories, explanations, justifications, meanings and symbols that provides legitimation to a range of distinct actors and agents to engage in certain kinds of actions and to create certain kinds of institutions. In this sense, it is neither a sheer negative ideology nor an empty idealistic aspiration, as some authors think, but rather a cultural form with practical efficacy. (Strydom 2002, 128)

[6] Announced by EasyJet in November 2019, see Topham (2019).

It is more of amalgam of diverse elements that do not fit neatly together. This cognitive interpretation is also affirmed by other theorists, in contrast to the normative interpretation (Eder 1996, 206-209; see also Eyerman and Jamison 1991). In this respect, sustainability contains both immanent and transcendent dimensions: it is immanent in manifold practices and discourses, but it also signals a way to reach beyond the limits of current thinking. However, for this to really address the severity of the environmental problems facing contemporary societies, it will require a new approach to the very understanding of nature and the relation of the social world to the natural world. Unless this happens, it may indeed be the case that immanent-transcendence will be part of the problem rather than the solution. In short, the challenge of sustainability is about going beyond the anthropocentric horizons of critical theory.

Finally, the aesthetic dimension must be highlighted since this is something that has a particular resonance in some versions of sustainability as a low or non-carbon future. In this context, the notion of an imaginary captures the projection of an image, for example of a future society or alternative social order, and has an affective or emotional dimension to it. However, as I have argued, this is only one element and in many articulations of sustainability, the radical imaginary is weak or absent. The notion of an imaginary suggests the capacity to image something new, but for that to be possible there must be a context in which it emerges. Once expressed, it cannot sustain itself but needs other cultural elements to become infused with reality. As I said, I am sceptical that the idea of a sustainable society contains an imaginary dimension, since it is mostly a question of preventing the worst.

A proper critical sociological account of sustainability would need to take into account all these dimensions and their interrelations. This is also a way to make sense of the contested nature of a phenomenon or discourse, such as sustainability. Understood as a cultural model, its elements or dimensions interact to produce different interpretations. As with many ideas of reason, such as peace, democracy, justice, care etc., sustainability is an abstract idea that enters into the practices and discourses of different social actors leading to very different interpretations. However, sustainability is not on the same level as these ideas of reason, but draws on them and it could be said to be based on a combination of such ideas.

From a social theoretical perspective, sustainability is thus an idea that is given form in a cultural model. Such cultural models are neither static nor self-contained. As I see it, the idea of sustainability is closely related to other similar ideas, for instance justice, democracy, care, concerning the relationship between nature and society.

This is perhaps why it needs to be placed in a larger context of interpretation. The notion of a sustainable society is no longer something that can be considered without taking into account a concept of nature that goes beyond the traditional views of nature as a static or as a relatively stable natural environment of human societies. Ulrich Beck's theory of the risk society challenged that view of nature as the natural environment (1986). This perspective has now been given a new significance with the idea of the Anthropocene. In this re-scaling of the relation between nature and society, a deeper and more extensive notion of the natural environment emerges that encompasses the planetary scale of the earth. The arrival of the Anthropocene marks an ontological shift in thinking about human societies and their future. The world as the location of human societies no longer can take for granted the earth as a stable ground.

In foregrounding the context of the Anthropocene as a major challenge for thinking about the future of human societies, we can perhaps arrive at a more critical conception of sustainability. The notion of critical sustainability might be an appropriate concept for the new epoch of post-ecological politics. By this I mean a politics of nature that is focussed on the planetary scale and sees as the primary reality the deep links between the world (human societies) and the earth (the planet). This is a relationship that is also played out around subjectivity. It is reflected in a new emphasis of responsibility as a collective and even a global phenomenon. Perhaps, the real significance of the concept of sustainability is in the generation of new ideas of citizenship, democracy and political community. In this respect, the notion of collective responsibility looms large and itself also takes on a cultural form that does have an imaginary dimension to it. The idea of collective responsibility has a strong lineage in the critical theory tradition, since K.-O. Apel's reconceptualization of collective responsibility (Apel 1987; Strydom 2002, 129-130).

The politics of sustainability along with notions of the risk society and collective responsibility need to be sociologically located. Also

from a broad critical-theory perspective, Klaus Eder has provided a useful framework for theorizing the new phase of environmental politics. Against Beck's notion of the risk society, Eder argues that environmentalism has forced us to rethink the institutional basis of politics and democracy. This is not because of risk as such, as Beck claimed, but because of two inter-related phenomena: "the specific cognitive structure of the problem of nature and the complex social integration processes between collective actors who merge in dealing with the problem of nature" (Eder 1996, 200-201). His theory of the 'post-corporate order' sees collective actors as having a constitutive role in the making of the social order in terms both of normative and cognitive institutionalization: "Social movements become part of the cognitive order which characterizes society as a whole" (Eder 1996, 201). This is also where the public enters the institutional system leading to a situation in which the politics of nature go beyond the level of social movements and of elites. To take Eder's thesis further, it can be suggested that today sustainability is no longer a separate aim of governance, but is becoming the very rationale of governance.

There is possibly also a civilizational dimension to the transformation of the concept of nature. In so far as it raises the spectre of the unsustainability of society and thus of societal survival. It may indeed transpire to be the case that the politics of nature in the epoch of the Anthropocene will take on a civilizational form in bringing about a major transformation in human societies. For this to happen, sustainability would need to be defined in terms of human survival, or at least the survival of human societies. However, I also think it would need to be given a wider contextualization for it to have a genuinely civilizational significance, as I do not think that the idea of sustainability has in itself the force needed. Yet, it is undoubtedly an element that might be constitutive of a radical imaginary that has a civilizational significance (see Arnason 1989, 2003).

In this article, I will not pursue this prospect and instead highlight the potential usefulness of the concept of critical sustainability as an alternative to the neoliberal version. Critical sustainability is thus a challenge to what Adorno called 'deluded thinking' and as an alternative to the 'damaged life' that has come with the unsustainable societies of modernity. It is now increasingly apparent that one of the many

contradictions of modernity is the contradiction between the belief in the infinity of growth and the finite resources of the earth to sustain it. An immanent critique of modernity from the perspective of critical sustainability seeks thus to disclose the antagonism and contradiction of a society predicated on infinite growth, prosperity and progress but with finite resources.

3. SIX CULTURAL MODELS OF SUSTAINABILITY

Sustainability is a not a single phenomenon but takes multiple forms. Sustainability, I have argued, is a cultural concept that is expressed in a plurality of discourses. Each of these encapsulates different cultural models that are the basis of specific practises, discourses and societal structures. In all and to varying degrees, there are latent critical openings, which can be captured by the metaconcept of critical rationality. Six main discourses can be identified. While I see these as empirical phenomena, taken as a whole they suggest a framework that also has an analytical advantage.

Corporate sustainability

This is essentially the dominant pro-growth model of sustainability. It is the position that capitalism and growth have to reconcile themselves to the need to take into account ecological limits to production and consumption. It is not primarily opposed to growth but recognises the need for reduced carbon sources of energy. It has been referred to as 'climate capitalism' and is compatible with neo-liberalism in that the Green Economy can be a basis of economic competitiveness (Newell and Paterson 2010). It is reflected in eco-efficiency, low or non-carbon energy. While much of this is driven by the corporate sector – such as the car and airline industry – it is not exclusively so, since the corporate sector has to negotiate with social movements, the state and the public in what is now the post-corporate order. Such forms of sustainability are also reflected in international carbon-trading and the ideology of corporate social responsibility.

It can also be characterised by techno-market sustainability in that it rests to a considerable degree on technological innovation (see also

Levy and Spicer 2013). In general, this understanding of sustainability is simply about sustaining unsustainability, as in the claim that electric cars are more ecological than non-electric cars. This claim simply means that pollution is emitted by the electricity plant than directly by the car, since the energy has to come from somewhere. Or the deluded policies around the recycling of plastic, when only 9% is recyclable.

Environmental sustainability

In contrast to the corporate culture of sustainability, environmental sustainability is explicitly addressed to the preservation of the environment rather than to the consumer economy. This is the older tradition of environmental activism and radical political ecology that developed in the 1970s and 1980s with Greenpeace and Friends of the Earth (see Gorz 1987, 1994). It was reflected in grassroots activism as well as in legal activism and in the Green political movement of the 1980s in West Germany. The dominant emphasis is placed on preserving biodiversity, species protection, reversing de-forestation and soil degradation. In recent years, climate change has brought these concerns on to a new level with the over-riding concern with reducing greenhouse gasses such, as C02 and Methane, and thus reducing global rises in temperature. A pertinent recent example is the Extinction Rebellion movement, which can be seen as a continuation of the radical ecology that came with Greenpeace.

Social sustainability

The former culture of sustainability often took on a conservative form in so far as it was defined by conservation. More radical expressions were in political ecology. Distinct from this tradition, we can also distinguish what I call social sustainability. By this, I mean demands for social justice by those whose lives are negatively affected by unsustainable economies. This is expressed in movements for environmental justice and accordingly seeks more social forms of sustainability whereby sustainability is not only about preserving the environment but is also about the sustainability of forms of life. The Andean concept of *buen vivir* and the notion of *ubunta* of the Bantu speaking people of Africa

are illustrative examples, as are demands for sustainable housing (see Dobson 1998).

Life-style sustainability

This refers to sustainability as an everyday practice (see Levy and Spicer 2013). It can also be designated life-style sustainability. While corporate sustainability is based in the system of production, this is based predominately on consumption. It is exhibited in, for example, more ecological patterns of living, including less materialism and alternative modes of consumption. It is also expressed in a preference for local produce, urban gardening and the rediscovery of traditional ways of relating to nature. Rather than reducing carbon-footprints within a largely culture of consumption, it is opposed to consumption *per se*. It can take soft forms as well as more radical forms. Much of this kind of sustainability tends to place the emphasis on individuals and households for the creation of a sustainable society. The struggle for ecologically sustainable societies does not necessarily in itself lead to socially sustainable societies: as Greenberg notes, many of the 'greenest' cities, such as San Francisco, also have a high degree of social exclusion, as reflected in homelessness for example (2018, 185).

Radical sustainability

Many proponents of sustainability are not content with corporate modes of consumption, which seek to render sustainability compatible with growth and seek only to reduce carbon fuels. Radical sustainability –deriving from radical political ecology– is the demand for the end of unrenewable carbon fuels. It is also more firmly anti-growth, not resting content with low growth or compromises, such as carbon-trading. In short, calls for a radical transformation of the global economy are often seen as the only solution to the problems of climate change. Such calls are often strongly anti-capitalist and represent the most recent kind of radical politics involving the confluence of anti-capitalism and environmentalism. So rather than sustainable growth, or forms of sustainability that reply on individuals and households, what is demanded is de-growth or post-growth societies.

Resilient sustainability

The response to climate change especially where major disasters have occurred or are imminent is often not in demands for radical transformation, but in a new emphasis on resilience. Corporate modes of sustainability are not sufficient and other cultures of sustainability are too domesticated to deal with the objective reality of catastrophe. This has led to a new concern with climate or environmental emergencies and 'tipping points'. This mode of sustainability corresponds to what Adloff and Neckel (2019) call 'sustainability as control'. It concerns the capacity of societies and ecological systems to absorb shocks, whether as a result of heat waves, climate migration, floods, water or food shortages. With the onset of resilient sustainability, we are in the domain of the dystopia of emergency governance and the spectre of ungovernability in the new politics of the Anthropocene.

I have outlined these cultures of sustainability all too briefly in order to show that sustainability takes a number of very different articulations. In my characterisation, I sketched six. Adloff and Neckel (2019) have identified three main types, which correspond to my 1st, 5th and 6th. I think a wider array is needed to capture the range. Levey and Spicer (2013) highlight four climate imaginaries, of which one is 'fossil fuels for ever'. I disagree with this otherwise insightful analysis on the grounds that these discourses are not imaginaries as such, though in some cases imaginary significations are partly present. It does not seem to me to be plausible to describe the pro-fossil fuel lobby as having an imaginary at their core. I do not see the defenders as deploying that kind of argumentation, which is rather more one of denial and obfuscation. Another approach, the Critical Sustainabilities Project at the UCSC, has a more productive five-fold framework, which has considerable overlap with the approach proposed in this paper.[7]

In terms of the methodology of critical theory, the aim is not simply to stress the plurality of positions and their cultural orientations. If it were only a matter of a proliferation of different discourses, there would be no critical transformation in the direction of critical sustainability. From a critical theory perspective, it is necessary to demonstrate

[7] See Critical Sustainabilities Project, available at: https://critical-sustainabilities.ucsc.edu/about/ [1 November 2019].

how the various models are inter-related and connected to wider societal discourse. In my view, there is potential for greater innovation than simply documenting a diversity of forms.

First, the various cultures interact with each other. Some are predicated on a strong opposition to others. There is also considerable overlap between some. Second, all types are based on the underlying engagement with the abstract idea of sustainability, but the various actors construct different cultural modes based on very different interpretations and cultural orientations. Third, all types exist and are acted out in the context of a situation that is volatile and contingent on developments that are unpredictable in the external world and in public receptions. The concept of critical sustainability seeks to capture these dimensions of both the general or abstract notion of sustainability and the concrete discourses that seek to realise it. As such, it is more of a meta-concept than an empirical reality, but is nonetheless embedded in reality, as in, to varying degrees, the above six discourses.

We now arrive at the crux of the critical approach. As in the methodology of immanent critique: the whole point of the above analysis of the idea and discourses of sustainability is to show that it entails a meta-critical function that provides a focus for social actors pursuing different and often contradictory objectives and practices. Some of these practices, as in the above discussed discourses, entail variously deep or shallow interpretations of what a sustainable society involves, but they cannot entirely circumvent the objectivity of the normative demand to address the contradiction of a society based of finite environmental resources and infinite growth. In that sense, in the language of critical theory, there is a dialectic of actuality and potentiality at work in these discourses of sustainability and that, therefore, the idea of sustainability admits of the possibility of societal learning. For this reason, I use the notion of critical sustainability in order to capture the latent transcendence in the idea of sustainability to go beyond the level of actuality.

4. CONCLUSIONS: IN DEFENCE OF CRITICAL SUSTAINABILITIES

A fruitful agenda for sociological research within a critical theoretical framework would be to investigate these cultures of sustainability. In line with the framework outlined in the foregoing, a consideration of

the various elements of the operative cultural models would provide a basis for a more differentiated and robust understanding of the contested discourses of sustainability. Such an approach would have to take into account the fact that there are many points of overlap between these cultures as well as points of tension leading to the formation of new forms.

Since critical theory requires a view of society as a whole, or the consideration of a given phenomenon in terms of a larger unit, the ultimate aspiration is not an analysis of plurality as such, but the conditions of the possibility of the social and the gestation of a progressive politics for the making of a better world. To this end, a critical theory perspective begins by addressing the objectivity of crisis and the spectre of unsustainability, the condition of what Adorno called 'damaged life'.

As recognised in 1981 by Habermas in the closing words to the second volume of *The Theory of Communicative Action* (1987), the core conflict at the heart of modernity centres on the emergence of two great social movements, the environmental and the feminist movement. In that account both were seen as separate. Looking at these issues from the perspective of the present day would see them as more connected in that many of the issues cut across different spheres. It would also be important to move beyond Habermas's conception of the environmental movement as defensive. These issues include, but are not reducible to, sustainability. In order to tap into the potentially critical possibilities of sustainability it needs to be seen as connected with other principles, or ideas of reason, such as reflexivity, critique and responsibility. The notion of critical rationality seeks to grasp this wider understanding of sustainability. The idea of critical sustainability goes to the heart of the problem in that it captures crossovers and potential societal learning in addressing some of the major challenges facing all societies today.

Critical sustainability is a concept that ultimately can be realised only through democratic politics. In the context of the wider scenario of the Anthropocene, it points to a revitalization of democracy in mediating the common good with social interests. This is the fundamental problem of democracy, but one that no longer can be seen as reconcilable on a national level and nor as something that does not entail a consideration of the unsustainability of society itself and the fact that solidarity and scarcity no longer define the foundations of the political.

The notion of the common good is no longer simply a matter of advancing the greatest good for the greatest number of people within the limits of the constitutional protection of rights: it also has to be constrained by the possible costs to the natural world.

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